

News of Delaware County

BOROUGHES EDITION

102768 6

WEDNESDAY, November 13, 1991

EPA searches 4 towns for missing radium



133 Austin Avenue

By MICHAEL E. BRATIS
Associate Editor

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is searching for radioactive material in a 1.5-mile radius surrounding 133 Austin Avenue in Lansdowne.

Due to radiation levels as much as 15 to 33 times higher than is considered safe, the EPA recommended Sept. 30 that the Austin Avenue home be declared a Superfund site.

With a white "Mobile Counting Van," a converted commercial delivery truck, the EPA is hoping to locate "as much as hundreds of tons" of radioactive material that has been missing from a warehouse next to 133 Austin for 70 years, EPA spokeswoman Leanne Nurse said yesterday.

For the rest of this week, EPA workers will drive the van along

streets in Lansdowne, East Lansdowne, Yeadon and Upper Darby to find traces of radium 226, leftover material from radium processing at the warehouse between 1915 and 1922.

As far as anyone knows, the processed radioactive ore could have been sent to landfills or to fill construction sites, EPA officials have acknowledged.

Since the van began scanning the area last week, several hot spots have been found, Nurse said. But areas with elevated radiation levels must be confirmed with soil samples, she said.

The current Superfund site is bounded by the south side of Austin Avenue, the first block of Maple Avenue, the nearby railroad tracks and Union Avenue, Nurse said. If confirmed hot spots are found elsewhere, the site will be expanded, she said.

Landlord faces foreclosure

By JENNIFER GLASSE
Correspondent

The owner of the radiation-contaminated house at 133 Austin Avenue, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommended for Superfund site status Sept. 30, may lose the house to foreclosure.

Bill Walls, who purchased the \$31,000 property in 1986 as an investment, had been paying the \$350 mortgage with rental income that totaled \$794 from tenants in two apartments.

The tenants, a single man and a family of four including a pregnant woman, were relocated from in June, when high radiation levels were detected. Walls has not paid the mortgage since.

Tests on the house revealed radon levels that may increase the tenants' chances of getting lung cancer, according to an assistant surgeon general for the

U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

According to laws governing Superfund sites, both current and former property owners can be held liable for clean-up costs. Since June 12, the EPA has spent nearly \$2 million on radiation surveys and 24-hour security guards at the site, said EPA spokeswoman Leanne Nurse.

Walls said the EPA had not contacted him since June or July, when they asked for permission to enter the house. He has written three letters to the agency through two lawyers since and has received no reply.

"We gave him the notice that is required," Nurse said yesterday. "He (Walls) received verbal notice. We always say 'We're here at your place and can you pay for it.' With private property owners, the answer is usually no, and we tell them we will be using fed-

eral funds."

"They're (the EPA) spending all that money and they haven't spent a 29-cent stamp on me to let me know what's going on," said Walls. "It gets you down, they had a press conference on the lawn, and the papers and the TV and radio stations were there and I didn't know about it. They didn't notify me, the owner."

"It's up to the EPA, I don't have the money to pay the mortgage, so if the EPA doesn't help, in a couple of months, the bank will foreclose," Walls said. "It looks as if it would have been better if I had denied access — played hard ball. I feel like if I had made a stand in the beginning, now the EPA would be more responsive."

The contamination at 133 Austin is believed to be the result of radium processing at a warehouse adjoining the property, at



BILL WALLS

36 S. Union Avenue, that occurred between 1915 and 1922. Radiation levels taken at the warehouse are lower than those at the house. The warehouse is scheduled to be demolished in the next few weeks, the EPA said. The future of the house has not yet been determined.

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